Picky Eaters

Is Your Child a Picky Eater?
Are you concerned that your child refuses to eat vegetables or any green food? Sometimes a child won't eat an entire meal if a single green pea is on the plate.

Does your preschooler suddenly react to an all-time favorite food with "No!" or "I don't like this"?

Has your child ever wanted to eat the same food meal after meal? They only want to eat peanut butter sandwiches, yet last week they wanted nothing but grapes and bananas.

Does your child get upset because one food on their plate touches another food?

The preschool years are characterized by bouts of independence. You might think that your child is a picky eater, but their behavior may be an awkward first step in learning to make decisions. This is a natural part of growing up.

Most children go through periods of being finicky eaters. This phase doesn't last long, so treat all of these reactions to foods very casually.

Ways to Handle a Picky Eater
Parents and caregivers need certain skills and techniques to ease mealtime struggles with picky eaters. Even the most finicky eaters can be encouraged to try a few bites of new, different, nutritious foods at every meal.

Follow these tips for handling a picky eater.
- Be patient if your child wants to eat the same food over and over. This is called a "food jag," and it doesn't usually last long enough to cause harm. If the food that the child eats repeatedly is a healthy food, then allow them to eat it until the food jag passes.
- Offer a variety of healthful foods to your child, and they will learn to eat them.
- When introducing new foods, do more than ask your child if they want a serving. Let them see it in their plate, cup or hand.
- Be patient and allow your child to explore foods. If they aren't ready to taste it yet, allow them to just look at it. It is normal for them to want to touch or smell food on their plate before they are willing to taste it.
- Introduce only one new food at a time. Let the child know whether the new food will taste sweet, salty or sour.
- Seat a reluctant taster beside a friend, brother or sister who is a good eater, especially when a new food is introduced.
- Let the child decide the amount of food to try, and wait for them to ask for more. Give permission to eat small amounts. A "taste" can be as small as ½ teaspoon.
- Encourage your child to at least taste food, but never force them to eat it. If the food is not eaten after a reasonable time, simply take it away and bring it out again later.
- Serve an unfamiliar food with familiar ones. This will increase the likelihood that the child will taste the new food. For example, serve a peanut butter sandwich made with one piece of white bread and one piece of whole wheat bread.
- Give the child the option of not swallowing a new food. Show them how to carefully spit the food into a napkin if they decide they don't want to swallow it.
- A child's "No" doesn't always mean no. Continue to offer a new food and don't give up. Many young children must be offered a
food 10 times or more before they will take a bite, according to recent research.

- Serve food plain, because many children like foods that they can easily recognize.
- Respect the "no foods touching" rule if that is important to your child.
- Remember that most children prefer bright colored foods with interesting textures.
- Don't become a "short-order cook." Expect a picky eater to eat what the rest of the family eats. Offer the same foods to the whole family, but always serve at least one food that everyone will eat.
- If a child doesn't like a certain food, consider substituting a similar food (e.g. sweet potatoes instead of squash).
- Trust your child's appetite. Forcing them to clean their plate encourages overeating.
- Read stories about food to and with your child. They may be more likely to try a food that has been introduced in a story.
- Include your child in meal planning, grocery shopping and food preparation whenever possible. Even the most finicky eater is more likely to try a food they helped prepare. This sense of ownership creates interest and curiosity to help "sell" that first bite.

**Be a Good Role Model**

Imitation is a powerful force in learning. If you want your child to drink milk or eat their veggies, make sure they see you drinking your milk and eating your veggies.

Buy and try new fruits and vegetables. Always make healthful foods available for snacks as well as meals. Your child soon learns these are the foods in your home and will eventually come to eat and enjoy them.

Drink plenty of water between meals. Eat meals and snacks on a routine schedule. When eating on the run, use grab-and-go containers for convenience.

Make mealtimes pleasant. Turn off the TV and enjoy some good family conversation without arguing. Avoid conflict when handling eating challenges so that your child won't learn to use food as a way to control you.

Most importantly, relax and be patient! Focus your attention on your child's positive eating behavior, not on the food. Avoid criticizing them or calling them a picky eater, because a child believes what you say.

**Parents' Top Ten Feeding Mistakes**

10. Withholding dessert if dinner is refused, or using other foods as a bribe.
9. Expecting a child to sit at the table and eat for longer than 15 minutes.
8. Becoming a "short order cook" to accommodate everyone's food preferences.
7. Catering to a child's narrow choice of foods, then wondering why they do not like or eat a wider variety of foods.
6. Sending inconsistent messages to a child about acceptable food choices, snacks and table manners.
5. Failing to define or set house rules for mealtime behavior.
4. Failing to enforce house rules for mealtime behavior.
3. Worrying that a child will starve or go hungry when they refuse a meal, then giving them junk foods "just so they will eat."
2. Forcing vegetables on a child.
1. Ignoring how feeding responsibilities should be divided. Parents should control the when, where and what of feeding, and children can determine whether or not they will eat a food and how much.

This countdown of mistakes was compiled by Ellyn Satter (registered dietitian and author of several books on feeding children) and extracted from *Picky Predicament: at the Koniskys, an All-To-Common Tantrum Turns Dinner Into a Drama*, Jennifer Gish's article in the Albany (NY) Times Union on November 14, 2006.

**Nutrition Needs of Preschoolers**

Preschool-age children may have smaller appetites than toddlers due to a slower rate of growth and development. If left alone, most preschoolers become hearty eaters again when their body's growth pattern requires more food for energy.

Consider what your child eats over several days, not just at one meal. They may eat more food one day and less the next, and most children eat a wider variety of foods than parents realize. If you think your child is eating too much or too little, talk with
your doctor, health care provider or a registered dietitian.

Children and adults need the same nutrients but in different amounts. Children also need a certain amount of fat in their diet in order to grow. For more information about children's nutrient needs, refer to HGIC 4011, MyPyramid for Kids.

Nutrients should come from foods. Multivitamin supplements can be given to children, but supplements should not be used as a safety net against unhealthy eating.

**Is it Food Fussiness or a Food Allergy?**

Thirty minutes after your child's morning snack, they are cranky, they are crying, and their eyes are swollen. How do you know if they have a food allergy or if they are just acting picky about what they eat?

A food allergy is an abnormal reaction to food, confusing the body's immune system. Within minutes (or in up to two hours) the reaction triggers symptoms that may seem like an illness:

- sneezing, runny nose, coughing, difficulty breathing, wheezing (asthma)
- itchy skin or eyes, rash, swelling
- nausea, diarrhea, gas, pain, cramps

Never try to diagnose a food allergy yourself. If you suspect that your child has a food allergy, take them to your doctor or health care provider. Most allergic reactions are just uncomfortable. However, a small percentage of people have severe reactions that can be life threatening.

**Sources:**


This information has been reviewed and adapted for use in South Carolina by Janis G. Hunter, HGIC Nutrition Specialist, and Katherine L. Cason, Professor, State Program Leader for Food Safety and Nutrition, Clemson University. (New 02/08.)

This information is supplied with the understanding that no discrimination is intended and no endorsement by the Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service is implied. All recommendations are for South Carolina conditions and may not apply to other areas. Use pesticides only according to the directions on the label. All recommendations for pesticide use are for South Carolina only and were legal at the time of publication, but the status of registration and use patterns are subject to change by action of state and federal regulatory agencies. Follow all directions, precautions and restrictions that are listed.